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Senior Project Final Paper

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Continuing Dance in College: Educating Young Dancers About the Benefits of Pursuing Dance in Higher Education

It's not hard to think back and imagine how scared I was to go to college when I was merely a junior in high school. I knew I wanted to dance, and I knew other people who were pursuing dance in their own ways, but I was not sure what exactly was right for me. My dance studio owner, Laura Carroll, chose to take me under her wing and walk me through this process step by step. She looked at schools with me, convinced my parents of the benefits of the degree that I wanted to pursue, and helped me prepare for auditions. Looking back, I cannot believe how fortunate I was. So many dancers I knew were talented and passionate, yet they failed to continue dancing in any capacity in college. I wondered why that was. If they had more information about continuing dance in college on the front end, would they have made different choices and chosen to dance in some capacity? Did they know how much dance was benefiting them in high school? Have they found something that still provides them those benefits now that they are in college?

With these questions in mind, I came to the conclusion that there is a lack of encouragement from dance studios to continue dancing in college. This is due to a number of reasons, many of which stem from the fact that there just aren't enough hours in the day to keep kids at dance studios. Studio classes take up so much time already, and adding in rehearsals, extra workshops and master classes, many studios miss out on the opportunity to provide students with everything they might want to provide them with. Further, there

is a disconnect between where students talk about college options, which is in their high schools, and where they talk about dance options, which is in the dance studios. I have found that more often than not, students begin talking about college in middle school. If a studio mentions college options, it's usually not until much later in high school. There may be exceptions to this, but this is how I see the bulk of dance studios that I am accustomed to functioning. The option to continue dancing in college is being lost within both the high schools and dance studios. For my senior project, I set out to see how I could change this. How could I take the wonderfully personal and productive experience I had in working dance into my college career, and bring it to students who might not be so fortunate to have the same experience.

As I developed this project, I came up with the idea of a workshop. I felt this would be the best way to talk to larger groups of students and bring them a lot of information in a short amount of time. As a group in these workshops, we would work through a pamphlet full of information, before standing up and doing a little dancing. First and foremost, I tried to determine how to make this information feel important to these students. If they already had preconceived ideas about what they needed or wanted to do in college, I would have to present something that really made them alter their thinking about how much dance was benefitting their lives. For this reason, I chose to focus a portion of the workshop on the mental and physical health benefits of dance. It seemed vital to be presenting these big "whys" before presenting students with the "hows". I didn't give many scientific definitions or theories, rather, I put these benefits into terms and examples that I felt like the students would be able to easily recognize and relate to their every day lives. The next portion of the workshop would be all about options. I wanted to provide the students with an idea of the

vast array of ways that they could continue dancing in college. We spoke about the three larger umbrellas of dance majors, dance minors, and dance related student organizations. Within each of these, there is a plethora of different ways to make dance fit into their college experiences. When talking about these “hows”, I was very deliberate in the vocabulary I used to describe each idea. I believe that giving students the words to describe what they’re interested in doing makes them exponentially more inclined to actually do it. Further, providing students with a large number of options allows them to feel like there’s not only one way to continue dancing. Many students might know one or two people who did continue dancing in college, and I believe many of them consequently see dance as being pigeonholed to that one option with which they are familiar. This is certainly not the case, and I try my best to present enough options to students that it’s almost impossible for them to not see at least one fitting into their future lives.

After discussing all of these options that are available to students, the second half of the workshop would focus on auditioning for these majors, minors, and student organizations. Based on the current realities of dance in college, most majors, minors, and student organizations will include some kind of audition, and more than likely, that audition will include improvisation. Therefore, we talk about tips for auditions, as well as go through a variety of movement based improvisational tasks. When providing audition tips, I place a heavy emphasis on researching organizations before you audition for them. I really try to relay to the students that if they utilize social media and research a group prior to auditioning, they will know better what kinds of movement they might want to work towards in an audition, in order to stick out in a positive way. This idea can be easily related to the general college search that many students go through, as well as a job

interview process. I try to draw these parallels for students so that they understand that this idea will be common for them throughout the rest of their lives, and that it is something in which their parents will be able to assist them. My participants definitely walk away from the workshop understanding that they have to put in the preparatory work to continue dancing in college, just like they have to do to get into college in the first place.

This workshop was presented at three different dance studios between December of 2016 and February of 2017. First, I visited Ann Carroll School of Dance in Franklin, TN in December. There, I spoke to around fifty students total in two different sessions. These students ranged in age from middle school to seniors in high school, and I knew many of them very well. Not only did I dance with some of them myself, but many of them I have now taught technique classes to since graduating high school. Next, I went to Dance Extension in Dublin, OH in January of this year. At this studio, I spoke to close to twenty students, all of which were in high school. I currently teach at this studio on a weekly basis, so half of these students knew me quite well, and the other half of them have had very minimal interaction with me. Finally, I went to Pickerington Dance Academy in Pickerington, OH. There, I spoke to only eight students that again ranged in age from middle school to seniors in high school. I had never met any of these students before; my only connection to them was that I am a good friend with two of their teachers. Each studio visit brought me some kind of enlightenment about my workshop, but overall they all had many parallels that allowed me to draw many inferences about what my workshop was actually doing and how I could continue to improve it.

When evaluating how my workshops went, I realized that I was doing a lot more than

I actually thought I was doing. For example, I believed I was providing these students with an experience and information they might not have otherwise been receiving. Now although that is true, it might be more important that I am providing participants with terms and vocabulary that articulate what they are already gaining from dancing, as well as options for what they might want to be doing in the future. As I previously stated, I believe this vocabulary is crucial for students, as they are more likely to actually accomplish something if they are able to accurately articulate what it is they want to achieve. For example, in speaking to the students at the beginning of a workshop, many of them would mention the idea of “taking dance class in college”. What I gleaned from that statement was that they want to do what they’re doing at their studios currently once they go to college. This idea isn’t necessarily plausible, unless you’re interested in pursuing a dance minor or major, in which case these students would have to seek out a college that provides a dance major or minor in which they are interested. Therefore, these students need to be looking now for schools that fit these ideas. I don’t believe they would be looking for schools through this lens if they did not make the connection that “taking class” in reality is receiving a dance major or minor. After taking my workshop though, I believe these students were provided with a more accurate picture of what they might want to do to continue dancing. Rather than the vague idea of “taking class” they would know that they are interested in a more commercial dance minor, for example. In addition to this, another unanticipated learning experience was realizing that I am providing a positive example to these participants. I was in their shoes years ago, but I am now reaping the benefits of continuing dance in college. This example might inspire them, but it also provides them with a leg to stand on when speaking to their parents about these options. Many parents

are not understanding of pursuing any kind of dance in college, so it's important that I not only provide participants with detailed and well organized workshop pamphlets that they can bring home and show to their parents, but that I also provide a strong example just by being myself.

As I further evaluated the results of my three workshops, I tried to look objectively at how the specific choices I made lead to varying results. A lot of these ideas had to do with my specific presentation of the workshop material, and what I believe the students gained because of it. For example, I provided a lack of specific scientific terms in regards to the mental and physical health benefits of dance. When speaking to the students after the workshop, these mental and physical benefits were rarely something they brought up, and when they did, they were in even more vague terms than I had initially presented them. I believe that this was a direct correlation to how I presented the material. In the future, I plan to possibly require the students to take time with their peers to talk about what mental and physical health benefits they see making the strongest impact on their lives. This could be a good way to still keep things less scientific, while allowing the ideas to sink into their beliefs a bit more in the short amount of workshop time.

Another large choice I made during the workshop was how I presented the improvisational audition tasks. I noticed that groups of participants who knew me very well, immediately took things very seriously. They treated their tasks as if they were in an audition, and therefore their movement was able to undergo a more thoughtful change once I gave them feedback. Participants who did not know me as well were a very different story. I could tell that they were nervous to dance, or just weren't feeling like it, and I believe I tried to counter that by taking on a much more relaxed tone. This involved trying

to make them laugh, or making sure they were having fun, and I think in reality this only encouraged their movement to continue to be less thoughtful. Therefore, when I gave feedback to this participants, I felt like we still hadn't reached their full potential, as they were not giving the tasks their all from the beginning. I was very intrigued by these differences in participant performance, and it made me wonder if I needed to completely reimagine this audition portion of the workshop. Should the students be dancing right at the beginning of the workshop? I worry this would not allow them to see the importance of the auditions. Does it matter if they had another movement-based class right before the workshop? This might involve me changing the order each time I do the workshop. How can I make these improvisations feel important while also allowing the participants to keep having a positive experience? I'm just not sure how to answer some of these questions yet. In the future, I plan to alter how I present this portion of the workshop, and evaluate what works best for the largest variety of audiences.

After critically analyzing my choices and their consequences in regards to this workshop, I realized how much I had learned just from giving three of these experiences to different participant populations. What was possibly most exciting was how much I learned about myself as a teacher through these experiences. I learned that I value students having a fun and overall enjoyable time with me. Some of this may stem from the fact that I know that cognition, or an emotionally charged learning experience, is more likely to be stored and retrieved easily by students' brains. That being said, I also know that I am just an overall happy person, and I want my students to be happy when they're with me. In this same vein, I learned that all students respond well to humor, and it's rarely a bad time to crack a joke to grab kids' attention.

Much of my learning was also centered on my participants. Initially, I was so surprised by how many students would raise their hand right at the beginning of the workshop when I asked how many of them were interested in continuing dance in college. I expected it to be a small group each time, but at each workshop, most students raised their hands at this time. Later, when listening to student's questions throughout the workshop, I realized that the students believe they know more than they actually do. This can also be called illusory superiority. As I previously stated, many participants would raise their hands and show interest in continuing dance in college. But, when I would ask how some of them plan to do this though, many would have vague answers, or talk about "taking class" as I mentioned earlier. By the end of the workshop, participants were asking much more pointed questions about how to continue dancing, and this leads me to believe that they were not sure how to go about it when they initially raised their hands. That being said, students who showed no initial interest in continuing dance in college usually did show some interest when hands were raised at the end of the workshop. I'm hoping this means I have planted some kind of dancing seed in their brains.

In continuing to think about my differing participant populations, I noticed that the students who have not previously met me have some trouble connecting to me in the short amount of time that we spent together. This leads them to feel uncomfortable asking questions and guards them a bit in their openness to improvisational tasks. I'm wondering how I can combat this in the future. Maybe for populations who are not familiar with me, I could briefly mention at the beginning of the workshop that I am so excited to hear their questions, and that I want them to ask as many as possible. Also, when asking my own questions and waiting for a response, I need to remember that a longer wait time is usually

more necessary for students to retrieve answers from their long term memory, so I need to wait longer, rather than just jumping ahead and answering questions for them. Finally, I was surprised when my middle school aged participants were just as interested as my high school aged participants. These younger individuals were really benefitting from receiving this information, even though I initially thought this was certainly only geared towards high school aged dancers. A few of these younger students told me that they are already talking about college planning in their schools and with their counselors, and my workshop goes right along with those discussions. I was excited to see that this workshop was applicable to a much wider audience than I had originally anticipated.

Overall, I am extremely proud of how my workshops as a whole played out. One of the main achievements that I see from each of these workshops is the pamphlets that the students are able to take home with them. These are well organized, thoughtful materials, that students can feel comfortable showing to their parents as a leg to stand on when speaking about continuing dance in college. I even encouraged participants to talk to their parents that night at the dinner table about our workshop. A few parents who know me reached out and said the pamphlet is now on their fridge, and I could not be more excited about that. Another positive achievement is the bank of vocabulary I have planted in the minds of the students. Many participants would not have applied the words “dance major” to their lives until this workshop. As I mentioned previously, I believe having the correct words to describe what you want to do is absolutely vital in being able to actually achieve your goals. Also, for some students, this could have been the first time that they were asked to improvise in the context of an audition. This is a relatable, real world skill, and I am able to give them my expertise as both someone who has auditioned for a variety of things, as

well as someone who has judged a variety of auditions myself. Possibly what was most surprising to me, was that the studio owners were very interested in my program, and they helped me to understand that as I continue to develop these workshops, I could bring them to other studios and use them as a networking tool. Further, I now see this as expertise that I would be able to charge people for, and I plan to create my own LLC, so that I can copyright my ideas and continue to present these workshops more formally. The number of achievements, as well as the possibilities for growth in this project, feels quite endless.

I set out to educate students the same way I had been educated in regards to continuing dance in college. Although I was not able the same extremely personalized experience to these students, I do believe I provided them with a glimpse into the breadth of the opportunities that are available to them. I see this as the most effective way to communicate with the largest number of participants. Also, when I created the workshop format, I had no idea how important my language was going to be. Looking back, I see the vocabulary bank that I am presenting to these students to quite possibly be the most important thing that I bring into the room. It's my hope that the pamphlet allows some words to stick with them physically, and that they can help to jog their memory or be a push to continue researching deeper into specific options. Another derivation from my original plan was my focus on research. I never thought to speak to the students about this until I thought about this environment in which they are going to be entering college. Social media provides these students with quick knowledge and facts, and my hope is to easily relate this tool that they use on an every day basis to their college dance ideas. Finally, I had no idea that I wanted to continue working on this project once I graduated. That being said, I reaped so many benefits from it, as did my students, and it would be a waste of knowledge

to not continue developing these ideas and bringing them to more participants. I can tell what an attractive program this is to both studio owners and their students, that it is making a difference in their dance education, and I would be doing myself a disservice to not continue this work.